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Review of “The Greek Pursuit of Knowledge”

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Book Note

The Greek Pursuit of Knowledge, Brunschwig, Jacques and Lloyd, Geoffrey E.R., eds. Trans. under direction of Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003. xvi+387.
A Guide to Greek Thought: Major Figures and Trends, Brunschwig, Jacques and Geoffrey E.R. Lloyd, eds. Trans. under direction of Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003. xvi+486.

Despite the truism that books serve various purposes, academic book reviews tend to focus on the academic virtues of the books reviewed. The value of any book in the academy, however, is a different issue, its value in the overall context of teaching and learning.

These two anthologies have languished longer on my desk than they deserved, but this is not a reflection of their value within the academy.

Any anthology on a huge topic such as Greek thought, bereft of the usual academic apparatus, will have significant limitations for the scholar, and so it is the case for both of these books.

For the teacher and the student, however, these limitations are immaterial. The two anthologies are useful additions to one's personal library, and serve to ground both teacher and student in some of the fundamental concepts, individuals and schools that laid the groundwork for much subsequent western thinking.

One of the realities of the academy is that, as one's area of specialization narrows, the expectations of first teaching assignments broaden. The new faculty member who has become an expert in a narrow area is asked to teach courses for which comprehensive field examinations are no preparation. The junior member inherits entry-level courses, survey courses, often teaching students who have no prior knowledge of the field -- the sorts of courses with large numbers of students that more senior colleagues have happily passed along. Handed a course in Early Modern Philosophy, how do you teach it to students whose only knowledge of Aristotle comes from the Monty Python *Philosophers' Song*? Delving too deep into the philosophical background ensures a disastrous attempt to cover the intended course material, but no background at all reduces students to humming about how much Socrates will be missed -- muttering and how little you will be missed, as a teacher of philosophy.

Books like these provide the junior scholar/teacher and novice philosopher alike a useful introductory tool. Both books are balanced in perspective, focusing more on elaborating the outlines of the argument than taking an overtly polemical position (the kind one finds in Bertrand Russell's more readable *A*

History of Western Philosophy, for example). Each chapter ends with a key bibliography of sources for further reading -- though the inclusion of items in French and German, as well as English, would be daunting for some -- as well as standard editions of texts and translations. Both books are helpful resources for the junior scholar and for the student (even graduate student) who needs to have some background in Greek thought without the opportunity for intensive study in the area.

In *A Guide to Greek Thought*, philosophers and thinkers from Anaxagoras to Zeno are written about in a sort of intellectual biography, leaving the second half of the book for a description of the characteristics of schools of thought from “The Academy” to “Stoicism.”

In *The Greek Pursuit of Knowledge*, there are twenty chapters on different aspects of Greek thought, each written independently, but with enough cross-over in content that there are threads to follow throughout the volume. Beginning with the figure of “The Philosopher” in Greek thought, the reader is able to dip and skip through whatever elements are most germane as background to the subject being explored -- from Harmonics to History; Mathematics to Physics; Medicine to Theories of Religion; Technology to Astronomy and Cosmology; and to Language, Rhetoric and Poetics.

Each book concludes with a chronology/timeline that allows the different elements to be related visually and spatially -- again, a useful teaching tool but not something that the scholar should require.

As teaching and learning tools within the academy, these two volumes together could be invaluable as a solid introduction to issues, themes, thinkers and schools of thought in ancient Greece.

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